

The Birds of Beacon Hill  
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Craig Thompson

They move like starlings along Rainier Valley, touching down in the greenbelt by a road or up near homes. The autumn migration is on, a good time of year, rain not yet set for winter. Wings float across the sky, a sure intelligence soars from here to there and back again, season living up to its name as birds fall south till spring.

It was a summer of different birds on Beacon Hill. One called herself "Cat." She was the sort of girl you would have fallen in love with. Maybe sometime, maybe somewhere, maybe somebody did. On Beacon Hill, she was a thief, and though she knew many, she did not find love. She lived a hard life that ended up a third strike headed to jail, for a long, a very long time for a woman so young.

Perhaps you would have taken her to the high school prom, when she was not what she became.

Crime climbed the slopes from the Jungle this year, and though not all the action moved from that wild, beautiful place, enough did that it gained a response like no other in recent Seattle history. The last time there was such an outpouring about crime in Seattle was at the close of the 19th Century, when proper ladies patrolled the downtown streets to accost prostitutes and put them where they belong--in brothels, the largest partially owned by the mayor and chief of police. Other citizens organized Seattle's last lynch mob. The reaction in our time has been more positive.

The Jungle is now reverting to forest again. Bicycle paths, habitat restoration, public gardens are years in the making, but Seattle may see in its future a large park where a greenbelt once sprawled. What comes next?

The city has recommitted to quarterly sweeps of the area, making it more difficult for the type of violent heroin gang the community confronted this year to become entrenched again. Seattle learned a lesson: if you let a largely accessible greenbelt go, then not only will the neighbors' safety be jeopardized, but the homeless people who find refuge in it will be victimized.

Many city, county, and state agencies showed what can be done when they cooperate. In the recent past, the city witnessed riots, mismanagement, and petty political feuds that gave the region a reputation for bureaucratic incompetence. When something good happens, it seldom hits the news' hour, but the news does hit the streets.

The interagency taskforce organized by Jordan Royer of the Dept. of Neighborhood's Neighborhood Action Team showed public service at its best. The Parks Department, Social Services, the police, Seattle Public Utilities, King County Corrections, and Seattle and Washington State Dept. of Transportation

employees addressed their tasks with capable dedication. Those cross departmental teams provided a model for all of Seattle's communities: there is more to be gained from doing than by finding reasons not to.

A trespass agreement between the various agencies with jurisdiction over the greenbelt will likely be in place in December. The recently completed gravel road lets the police patrol the area, and trespass all they find from it, whether criminal, homeless camper, or neighbor walking a dog. This is a necessary step to stabilize the scene. Social services groups will send people into the Jungle, homeless people will sleep there, neighbors will walk dogs and go for strolls, but they do so at their own risk, and the risk of being ordered out.

Making the greenbelt an off-limits area to casual use is a transitional phase in reclaiming and restoring the forest. The city's foresters have in place a forest plan for the Jungle, so evergreens will grow when vine maples give way at the end of their natural lives. The Parks Department has agreed to coordinate with neighbors along Beacon Bluff so groups can visit the area and pitch in to help control ivy, blackberries, and other invasive plants. Several private landowners along the western edge of the bluff have plans for planting and controlling erosion. Several of Beacon Hill's community councils and block watch groups have demonstrated their willingness to step up to public safety issues; now they have a chance to create something meaningful that Seattle will appreciate for generations to come.

Where have the criminals flown? Thugs, dealers, prostitutes dispersed when work crews appeared. There were some arrests, but the "problem" migrated, first south to Beacon Avenue and the business district, down Rainier to Columbia City, but especially north. An outdoor shooting gallery developed near Harborview, while other junkies and their suppliers infested Capitol Hill.

The city will try to keep the problem on the move. As one neighborhood gets active, the problem is pushed into the next neighborhood. When that neighborhood responds with crime walks, community meetings, block watches--several approaches are effective--the problem moves to another neighborhood. Eventually, it comes back to where it began, and the circuit begins again.

Ordinary people are not well prepared to deal with this problem. Today's activists burn out tomorrow. Some get depressed, then angry, and anger leads to bad calls.

At a recent party, a group of guys gathered in my kitchen. We swapped stories about bonehead actions we'd taken in confronting crime in our streets. One

attacked a youth, pushing his victim down and threatening him with a garden fork. Another nearly assaulted a suspect with a baseball bat. Me, well, when my neighbor's house was broken into, I found a weapon, patrolled the yard, and entered the house. It was a mess. If the situations had been slightly different, all of us tough guys would have ended up being messes ourselves, bound for the hospital or morgue.

When a prowler enters a house, a thief finds a weapon. Those knives in your kitchen are not too far away from being knives in other hands. The best practice if your home is burglarized is to call the police. If they can't get there in time--the SPD is understaffed and when a life threatening situation occurs, it takes priority over break-ins--go to a neighbor's house and together you can watch and wait. Be safe. Discretion is still the better part of valor.

The best response of people along Beacon Bluff was that they came together to make a difference.

Early on, we organized large meetings and then dozens of neighbors contributed in important ways. We guaranteed the rights of the well-heeled and the struggling were respected. We made sure homeless people were not targeted, that racial profiling would not be an issue, and kept the goal of a safe neighborhood where people of all backgrounds can live without fear. A few wanted us to buy into fear, but most didn't write that check. We promoted a community that respects a diversity of opinion, where people are appreciated for doing right no matter who they are.

Will we witness more crime? Probably. How do we answer when the cycle begins again next spring?

When the birds return to Beacon Bluff, they'll find the same trees they've known for years. When we raise our heads to see them dot the sky, we will be the people we became this year. Like the workers who transformed the Jungle this past summer and fall, my neighbors had a chance to be the best Seattle can offer. It was a chance worth taking.